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Performing *King Arthur*

LARRY BECKWITH
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, TORONTO MASQUE THEATRE

At the founding of Toronto Masque Theatre in May, 2003, we made it an immediate priority to produce the five major works of music theatre by the great seventeenth-century English composer Henry Purcell. These were the four "semi-operas" (*Dioclesian, The Fairy Queen, The Indian Queen*, and *King Arthur*), and the "opera/masque" *Dido and Aeneas*. We knew we wanted to produce one each year and to delve into the challenges and magic of the multidisciplinary baroque "masque," to illustrate the strength and beauty of Purcell's music when placed in theatrical context. We were also confident in Purcell's genius, not only as a first-rate composer, but as a composer with a theatrical flair whose works were eminently stage-worthy. What was not as clear—and ultimately became our biggest challenge—was how a production could reconcile disparate performance elements, retain a sense of balance, and be comprehensible to a modern audience.

Our scheduling of these productions followed a sort of logic: we commissioned a companion piece to *Dido and Aeneas*, which needed at least two years to complete. So, Dido became the "centerpiece" of the five-year cycle. As artistic and musical director, I knew the score of *The Fairy Queen* well, and chose--with the collaboration of my artistic associates, Derek Boyes (stage director/actor) and Marie-Nathalie Lacoursière (choreographer/dancer)—appropriate scenes from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to complement the score. This would be a strong piece to "open" the cycle. Similarly, I was quite familiar with the score of *King Arthur*, and had seen the excellent staging of it at the 1995 Boston Early Music Festival. I somehow felt we would do well to delay as long as possible a production of *King Arthur* to allow us to develop a style and gain confidence with staging semi-opera. So, it was put at the end of the cycle, and

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was to coincide with the 350th anniversary celebrations of Purcell's birth in 2009. The two more obscure pieces—*Dioclesian* and *The Indian Queen*—were produced in the second and fourth years of the cycle respectively.

In addition to Purcell productions, our first four seasons included stagings of other baroque masques: John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, Charpentier's *La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers*, Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, and Monteverdi's *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. We also presented twentieth-century masque-inspired repertoire (Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*), "variety" evenings on wide-ranging themes and newly-commissioned masques from Canadian composers and writers. By the time we turned our focus to a staging of *King Arthur*, then, we had close to twenty productions under our belts and approached the rich music of Purcell and first-rate poetry of Dryden with an assuredness of having learned from earlier productions what works and what is not essential in producing Purcell.

We learned to be ruthless editors and to concentrate on presenting the elements of the story in a linear and direct way, eliminating extraneous characters and plotlines. We learned to approach the music, dances, and stories with sincerity and humility, keeping interpretations and contemplations of "sub-text" to a bare minimum and simply offering these pieces in a spirit of naturalistic warmth and charm. We learned to engage first-rate musicians, dancers, and actors who were open to the collaborative model we built for the company, artists who would revel in each other's talents and radiate the joys of discovery. Indeed, in most cases the rehearsal periods were short and intense, often culminating in dress rehearsals where we were watching each other's work for the first time! We learned to trust in our abilities to mount "historically-informed" productions, but not to feel hampered by notions of "authenticity." We developed a strong yet simple visual element to our productions with the use of projections of images created by a Montreal visual artist, Caroline Guilbault. Most importantly, we learned of the tremendously entertaining and moving power of Purcell's music, recognizing that it "fit" the dramatic situations it was seeking to complement brilliantly.

For our production of *King Arthur* we used twelve actors, six of whom played "roles" (Arthur, Oswald, Emmeline, Mathilda, Merlin, and Osmund) and the other six of whom represented the Anglo and Saxon armies. In addition, we used recorded voices (altered slightly, to given them "other-worldly" dimensions) for the characters of the spirits Philidel and Grimbald. We used four dancers, who moved in and out of the story and provided a corps for the large dance numbers. We used twelve singers, three of each voice type, who together formed the chorus and in various combinations sang the solos and small ensemble numbers. We had an orchestra of 14, one-to-a-part strings

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(with no double-bass, following the knowledge that Purcell rarely if ever used a "16-foot" instrument in his orchestras), two recorders, two oboes, bassoon, two trumpets, harpsichord, lute and percussion.

There were inevitable cuts to the score in order to keep the production under 2 ½ hours. These included the symphony, duet and chorus "Shepherd, Shepherd leave decoying" sung and danced by the "Kentish lads and lasses" in Act 2, and the two extended musical "dialogues," one that ends the Frost Scene ("Sound a parley") in Act 3 and "You say 'tis love" from Act 5. Other than these, we performed the entirety of Purcell's score. Throughout the rehearsal period, we marveled at how fully-integrated the score was to the story, from the sacrifice scene in Act 1, the battle, forest and shepherd scenes of Act 2, the justly-renowned Frost scene of Act 3, the extraordinary duet "Two daughters...," and the Passacaglia of Act 4 to the grand pageant of Act 5.

Our director, Derek Boyes, writes:

> As with all of Purcell's semi-operas the biggest challenge as a director is the magnitude of all of the elements involved. If played in its entirety, *King Arthur* would probably approach four hours in length. The theatrical centre of the piece is in itself a full-length play by modern standards with many characters and subplots. My first challenge was to trim the play down to an acceptable length time wise and an acceptable number of characters budget wise! When I first read the play, I found the strongest scene by far to be Emmeline's recovery of her vision: a wonderful scene for actors to play with humour, tension and a whole new way of playing "love at first sight." I kept that scene mainly intact and cut away anything that didn't feed into or out of that moment. The true joy of being able to direct all of Purcell's big semi-operas over the last 5 years was getting to understand and trust the emotional genius contained within Purcell's marvelously crafted music. I have come to describe the elements involved this way. The actors portray the mortals and give us a step into the world, the dancers take us into our imagination, and Purcell's music carries us away into another dimension that touches the immortal.

We know that *King Arthur* presents many challenges to the modern theatrical producer, and indeed the papers of the academic symposium that make up this special issue tackle these challenges far more eloquently than I could ever hope to. Our production was not perfect by any means; no production could ever hope to be. But I do feel it succeeded in making the case for the enduringly powerful messages of the play and the beauty of Dryden's poetry by offering it in a straightforward way, free of irony, post-modern angst and "relevance."

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Similarly, Purcell's music was given room to breathe, and performed with style, grace and simplicity. Toronto Masque Theatre continues to flourish, researching and presenting performances of masques new and old. We hope to revisit these special Purcell pieces in the not-too-distant future. Throughout the five-year Purcell Cycle, I was fortunate to have the counsel of Professor Brian Corman, who sat on the Board of Directors of Toronto Masque Theatre. I was grateful for his unwavering support and overjoyed that he convened the "Interrogating *King Arthur*" symposium as a complement to our *King Arthur* performances in April, 2009. It seemed only fitting to dedicate those performances to him.

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